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THE GILETS JAUNES, AN ANALYSER OF THE REPRODUCTION OF CAPITALIST SOCIAL RELATIONS [TEMPS CRITIQUES]

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From *lundi matin* #207, 09/09/2019, reflections on the yellow vests' movement ...

The gilets jaunes, an analyser of the reproduction of capitalist social relations [Temps critiques]

For the irregular publication Temps Critiques (to be consulted on this free site), the yellow vests' movement must be seen "as a resistance to the revolution of capital" (and which also "functions" as an 'analyser' of the crisis of reproduction of capitalist social relations"). The authors of this article, yellow vests themselves (the gilets jaunes being "nothing outside of its community of struggle"), describe the movement of the roundabouts as a "collective heresy" marked both by "the refusal of planned protest marches" and the outline of "less capitalised life practices shared in the joyful conviviality of 'cabins'".

Now with a little hindsight, we can ask ourselves the question of what links a movement such as the yellow vests can maintain with what we have called "the revolution of capital".(1) One can not say that it is the product of capital, because that would be close to a truism. It also can not be said that it is the expression of capital, because the revolution of capital is not a 'subject', but a process of forces tending towards what we have called capitalised society. There are forces that go in the direction of reinforcing this process or that fuel its dynamics and others that are counter-fires. The recurrent resistances that do not fail to occur during this process are part of these forces, but they have no final, fixed meaning, as we see in the history of workers' movement and that of socialist theories in general which have espoused the course of a 'progress' (in the so-called "progressive" camp, as opposed to the reactionary or conservative camp), something that today is very controversial.

Closer to us, a movement like May '68 carried within it the notions of emancipation and the end of alienation, but we now know (well, it's been a while) that this significance was overturned electorally by the Gaullist election victory (what political scientists call "the prize to the winners")(2); and that it thus finally participated in, with most of its activists defending as a body (Hegel's good old ruse of reason in history, of Hegel), this revolution of capital (what some have called "recovery", which for us is not one).

There is therefore no reason to proceed in any other way with the yellow vests' movement and it is moreover the majority of the positions defended within *Temps critiques*, and this precisely because we can not prejudge movement's principal meaning. It is

therefore not surprising that we did not adopt the position of denouncing the "confusions" that could find expression in it, coming from extreme or ultra left groups, with their revolutionary 'principles' as measures, principles invalidated and consigned to the dustbin of history, as the good Marx would say if he lived today. On this account, one could return the accusation against them, so much are most of them in a situation of great theoretical confusion because of the little efficiency of their patented compasses, incapable of turning their GPS's towards the revolution. To criticise one or more "confusions", one must have, if not particular theoretical and political certainties, at least a body of doctrines that permit "illuminating" (cf. enlightenment) the dark and troubled dimensions of an historical event.

This was the case with Marxism and anarchism since the First International; this is no longer the case with the exhaustion and then the defeat of the revolutionary workers' movement (in the 1920s, although other periodisations are possible). In the yellow vests' movement, a great diversity of individuals have been involved and have expressed themselves and among them, some from the extreme right and others from the extreme left; but there has never been a combination of these two currents; they coexisted until the end of December and disappeared in the practice of the movement, without their positions being at any time adopted by it. In other words, there has been no "coming together of the extremes", as has been analysed in certain aspects of fascism and Nazism (cf. Jean-Pierre Faye and his critique of totalitarian languages) and, moreover, could there have been such a junction, given that the yellow vests' movement has no ideology in the doctrinal sense of the term?

In this ideological *no-man's land*, the Blacks blocks will finally find their place, at the service of the movement, no doubt, but a movement of which one of the limits is precisely not to have determined more precisely how far it wanted to go in its confrontation with the State and what relationship it had with the police. There was clarification between the almost friendships of the beginning on the roundabouts on weekdays because these law enforcement officers were perceived as part of the dominated, in contrast to the harsh reality of the "legitimate violence" of the State and its armed guards during the subsequent Saturday urban protests. But the emphasis on repression to attract solidarity has been rather counterproductive, for not only has there been no active solidarity towards the movement by other social forces, but this latter has reduced the number of truly determined people. This was the intended goal of the government.

So no particular or specific "confusion" or combination of heterogeneous political forces, but rather individuals who, on the immediate basis of difficult conditions in everyday life, would aggregate on the basis of what appears to them (the governmental measure) like the drop of water that breaks the camel's back. From then on, a community of struggle gradually emerges which literally pulls the yellow vests out of their social atomisation and which appears to them moreover as an opening up onto an outside world that many seem to discover for the first time (see the discussions with the many first-time protesters). After the close meetings on the roundabouts on weekdays follow open discussions and opportunities for action with people "from outside", during the city demonstrations on Saturday and quick, targeted actions.

Rather than expressing the revolution of capital, it seems more accurate to speak of a movement which acts, in the first place, as a resistance to this revolution of capital (3) and acts as an "analyser" of the crisis of the reproduction of capitalist social relations; a particularly acute crisis in the sector that we have identified and defined as that of the reproduction of social relations. Indeed, the main contradictions of capitalism are now carried from the level of production to that of reproduction. But contrary to what some people think, like Laurent Jeanpierre in his book *In Girum: les leçons politiques des ronds-points* (La Découverte, 2019), the question of reproduction of which we speak is not comparable to that of the reproduction of a species in which, *in fine*, this author comes to oppose social and societal by giving primacy to the second term, into which he introduces the ecological/environmental dimension. In this, he finds himself completely in sync with a slogan more or less accepted under the influence of climate groups like *Alternatiba*, then brandished by fractions of yellow vests: "End of the month, end of the world, same struggle". And we had considerable difficulties in trying to correct an "End of the month, end of the world, same struggle" which specified more precisely the capitalist dimension of what we fight against, that it is the politics of great infrastructures, the systematic development of platforms to accelerate flows of capital or commodification of health care.

As for our active participation in the yellow vests' movement, we can say that it is quite "natural" insofar as we had previously developed theses on the human revolution, the tendency to capitalise all human activities and not only those deemed "productive"; and also in a more down-to-earth way, because we think that a movement capable of making an event by the surprise and the force of revolt, disobedience and even insubordination that it projects, is better than all the speeches around 'value' in the Place de la République during *Nuit Debout*. So it was not for us to intervene as professional activists ready to support any movement or any 'cause' engendering agitation, but to grasp the importance of this moment that from the outset caught everyone off guard. But after a first borrowed and timid approach in November, by December we felt like fish in water, even if it was necessary to mix sometimes with strange specimens.

That's why our critical activity turned into concrete political intervention. For this time, we were not 'standing above', as we were criticised by some insurrectionist currents and what we said met with such an echo that the group that formed around us in the '*Journal de bord*' was gradually transformed, certainly in Lyon, into a sort of yellow vests group in itself, recognised as such, which we had never asked for and which sometimes bothered us.

If the revolution of capital is not a 'subject', the yellow vests are also not one, and above all they do not constitute a 'subject of substitution' for the proletariat because they have no vocation to continue. However they do not form thereby an undifferentiated

and heterogeneous magma because they have been traversed by processes of individualisation that have upset the old class structures and contributed to the atomisation of individuals in urbanised geographical areas (see Henri Lefebvre), having the allure of the city, with all of its constraints but without its benefits.

What gave this impression of an undifferentiated mass was the fact that, contrary to prevailing current trends of recomposition of capitalist social relations, the yellow vests rejected the new forms of particularisation (gender, youth, communitarian, racist, etc.) in their first statement, "Tous Gilets Jaunes/We are all Yellow Vests". Of course, this led to the disarray of sociologists, journalists, trade unionists, etc.; it went against the political sense of those who still want and always find the "class line" and who could only cry screaming at the image of small bosses in four-by-fours alongside single mothers employed in supermarkets or old retirees; an original representation that did not last long for those who participated in a nine month movement and who were able to note its sociological and political transformation.

Thus, all the analyses in terms of classes that flourished at the beginning of the movement have been relativised or even invalidated. An attempt all the more ludicrous in that those who sought to set up these categorisations are those who are usually the most critical or reserved in relation to the contemporary use of this notion (sociologists or journalists who gargled "lower middle class" or leftists who saw a return of the class struggle). And this inadequacy of class interpretation even arose amid the yellow vests, when Drouet tried to launch a call for a general strike starting with his followers and noticed, after an internal poll, that the latter, for the most part, because of their objective situation, were unable to go on strike, either because they were not employees or because they worked in very small businesses!

To put it bluntly, the yellow vests are only their own movement, that is, they are only pure subjectivity in the movement of struggle. The conditions of life which underlie it play certainly as objective conditions, but they are unrelated to any general objective conditions. Only the struggle and the setting in motion produce a dialectic of conditions. This is the specificity of this type of movement in relation to the traditional dialectic of class struggle that implied a fixity or permanence of the relationship (a proletarian worker or a boss, remained a worker and a boss, even outside a cycle of struggle), with the labour unions mediating the reciprocal capital/labor dependence.

A yellow vest is nothing outside her/his community of struggle, hence a tendency for self-reference, to think of the movement as a totality (the people); a tendency which makes it difficult for it to grasp the current reversal of the balance of power. A difficulty that has visibly appeared in the outraged reactions or stupor vis-à-vis the results of the European elections, then, since the summer, in the desperate attempts of some to hold on at all costs. What creates the confusion, within the movement itself, is that while representing an event in the strong sense of the term marked by a limited duration, it has persisted in time without it being lead to become institutionalised (the refusal to participate in the "Great debate", the failure of yellow vest electoral lists in the European elections, the little decision-making weight of the Assembly of Assemblies) nor to continue in history (it is not a movement in the sense of the labor movement or the feminist movement; it is a movement in the sense of the one against the new labour law, but with a higher charge of insurrection). This persistence can be explained in part by its diversified and discontinuous modes of action and also by the fact that it did not seek to sort out or filter, keeping a lot of discussion open (avoiding issues that annoy) and focusing on objectives that guarantee unity in decision-making and action, without requiring an ideological unity, even one produced along the way by the movement itself. This does not mean that it did not incorporate elements that were not originally expressed, such as the question of the relation to nature, but it did not make it a criterion of discrimination or autonomy, even less a dominant criterion of identity. It integrated it not ideologically but as part of the ordinary experience of people from below, who doubt their near future (the end of the month) as well as the distant future (the end of the world).

In this sense, we can say that the movement has gone beyond its exclusive character as an event. Not because it would have formed a vanguard of a more general uprising, in the sense that this term could have been used for the role played by student insubordination in the May 1968 movement, but as a "collective heresy" without millenarianism, a notion which, although indefinite and marked by its religious dimensions, nevertheless accounts for the will to discontinuity that manifested itself in the absence of any declaration with prefectures of police for demonstrations and their paths, the refusal of overly planned marches in the manner of the labour unions with their marshals doubling the police presence, as well as in the collective life of the roundabouts where less capitalised practices of life shared in the joyful conviviality of the "cabins", without thereby shattering new revolutionary norms, as expressed, for example, in the ZAD of Notre-dame-des-Landes.

The yellow vests: heretics "in every matter", if one cares to mimic the complete formula of the fundamentalists of the RIC – Référendum d'initiative Citoyenne: "the RIC in every matter".

The yellow vests never saw themselves as avant-gardist. We have emphasised it: no utopia, not even a clear alternative other than that of a RIC stuffed with everything under the sky ... or social networks, no projection into any particular future; but also no nihilism of the "no future" type. On the one hand, a revolt and cries of anger in direct actions marking a "that's enough" and a desire to get rid of the political leaders; on the other, a general contestation of the authorities who hampered the development of the movement (resumption of the "police everywhere, justice nowhere" of the leftists during the demonstrations).

It is this heretical side that rejected the traditional workers' organisations that could no longer tolerate this outrage in 2018, no more than they had tolerated it in 1968. If on the one side we have heretics, the least we can say is that the others are Orthodox.

But more generally, it is all of the elements of the "left" that found themselves at odds with the movement because still living on the memory of a "proletarian experience", well analysed by Claude Lefort in the journal *Socialisme ou barbarie* (n° 11, 1952), which is little more than memory and at best nostalgia. Left-wing activists who, moreover, have no knowledge of this ordinary experience uniting the yellow vests because it is no longer determined primarily by the relation to labor-activity (the big factory, the neighborhood). This left, which can no longer and no longer wants to be "social" in the old sense of the "social question", then becomes "moral" by tracking non-ordinary experiences and limit situations everywhere, even if it means finding themselves towed by information entrepreneurs for whom the spectacularised situations of the diversely and variously discriminated against seem to be the only subjects worthy of attention, because on the one hand they have resonance in the media and on the other hand because they do not imply in themselves an attack against the powers in place and capital. Their political correctness then comes to collide head-on with the return of the incorrectness in politics of which the yellow vests gave an example. But this incorrectness is not a provocation as could be, from the left, the surrealists of the 1920s or that of the right, amid the "nonconformists" of the 1930s. It is also in this sense that the notion of avant-garde is no longer appropriate.

It is the expression of a political language, certainly basic, but which constituted a taking back of speech by people who had been deprived of it for a long time and who inevitably, for lack of habit, found themselves exposed to all the mockeries and criticisms of those who monopolise it ... or who rise up radically within the limits of their world.

And this event of political heresy, as sudden as it was unexpected, suddenly occupying the public and informational space, could not escape its share of what some bad omens call "confusions". But was there not also "confusion" in 68 within the leftist groups influenced by Maoism, Guevarism and other third-worldisms? Are there not also "confusions" today when one sees the development of ever more marked anti-Semitism of the left? The idea would certainly not have come to us, in 1968, to brandish the tricolour flag and we opposed it even when the Stalinists brandished it, but in a symbolic battle where we opposed it with red and black flags! And who today would like to brandish a red flag whose revolutionary historical value stopped roughly in 1923 and a black flag perhaps less devalued historically, but without any current meaning except for a very small fringe of people in a very limited number of countries? It is the same for the singing of the International. Internationalism is certainly not defined by the Marseillaise, but from Hong Kong to the Arab countries, and throughout many others, demonstrations of all kinds are covered with yellow ... and not red. Like most people, we do not particularly like the colour yellow and in addition, for those who have claimed the red thread of class struggles, it is an enemy color, but the movement has been able to make it its color by ease first, because it accompanies people everyday when, by car or bicycle, they keep a yellow vest in reserve by obligation and also, perhaps, because it was distinguishable from the colours of the union vests.

To judge the movement by stopping at its immediate symbolism, if it is not primary, it is to forget that many in the movement did not wear yellow vests, much less flags, nor did they sing the Marseillaise.

The reference to the French Revolution has long been perceived as a betrayal of the 'social' and is therefore difficult to accept, especially among Marxists influenced by the historical left-wing communists. However, it can be a point of reference and departure for many revolts, provided you do not stop there and work to clarify the difference between the taking of the Bastille by the *sans-culottes* and the feast of the federation celebrated by Macron with his fireworks. In our booklet on the right to petition,⁽⁴⁾ we tried to highlight the contrasting and sometimes contradictory path of the struggles that lead from the 1792 right of petition to the 2018 RIC, through the 'right' of rebellion of 1793. All of this was and has been the subject of discussions within the movement, as there have also been discussions around the question of the monopoly of legitimate violence that the State arrogates to itself, or whether or not the term citizen should be used to describe individuals and their actions, etc. These are seeds that can produce their fruit from the moment when we do not just reason in the traditional terms of political awareness, as this was conceived of by the socialist theories of the nineteenth century.

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1. Cf. J. Wajnsztein: *Après la révolution du capital*, L'Harmattan, 2007 and all the issues of the journal *Temps critiques* starting from N° 15.
2. Similarly, the 2019 vote in Europe is marked above all by the confirmation of a larger Macronian hard block than expected and a progression of the RN; two results that were received as a real blow by the yellow vests.
3. Cf. Special issue of *Temps critiques* of April 2019: "*Gilets jaunes: une résistance à la révolution du capital*", written in response to a request from the Swedish magazine *Subaltern*.
<http://tempscritiques.free.fr/spip.php?article400>
4. <http://tempscritiques.free.fr/spip.php?article405>
5. taken from here

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